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AUTHOR Borders, L. DiAnne
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ABSTRACT

This digest focuses on characteristics of good supervisors. Only a few researchers have focused on supervisor qualities and skills, and only three very brief models of supervisor development have been proposed. Good supervisors seem to have many of the same qualities as good teachers and good counselors, i.e., being empathic, genuine, open, and flexible. In terms of professional characteristics, good supervisors are both knowledgeable and competent counselors and supervisors. Existing models of supervisor development are briefly reviewed. The digest concludes with the author's reflections on being a supervisor and a supervisor educator. Contains 8 references. (NB)

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON Counseling And Student Services

ERIC DIGEST

April 1994 EDO-CG-94-18

The Good Supervisor

L. DiAnne Borders

It has been my very good fortune to have been supervised by several good supervisors. These supervisors were quite different from each other in personality and their supervision style, focus, and goals. One insisted that the person of the counselor is of greatest importance, and then struggled with me to discover who that person was for me and how to use it in my relationships with clients. Another focused on more concrete behaviors and cognitions, forcing me to learn how to articulate what I was doing and why. A third introduced me to a new theoretical perspective on counseling, broadening my conceptualizations of clients and my interactions with them. With each, I felt tremendous challenge to stretch and grow, buffered by an implied belief that I could achieve their goals for me. Each seemed to have been assigned to me at just the right time in my professional development, and/or they recognized my needs at that time and were able to provide what I needed. The influence of each of these supervisors can been seen in my counseling and supervision work today. Only one of these supervisors had received any supervision training.

Like other counselors, I also have had less memorable supervision, and have heard numerous colleagues' and students' horror stories about their unpleasant experiences as supervisees. Some describe busy supervisors or those who lacked interest in their supervisees and the supervision process. Some cite supervisors who seemed most interested in putting in the minimum required time with as little work and as few hassles as possible. Others remember mismatches in theoretical orientation to counseling or critical personality traits.

All of these experiences, and my own professional work in the area, have convinced me that *potentially good* supervisors are born, but *all* benefit from training experiences in which they focus on supervision knowledge and skills,reflect on their role and responsibilities, and receive input from others about their work as supervisors. These experiences also have led me to ask questions about what distinguishes "good" supervisors from "bad" supervisors and how counselors become effective supervisors.

Thus far, there are too few answers to my questions. The supervisor by far has received the least attention of any variable in the supervision enterprise. To date, only a few researchers have focused on supervisor qualities and skills, and only three very brief models of supervisor development have been proposed. What we do know is summarized below, drawing from reviews by Worthington (1987), Carifio and Hess (1987), Dye and Borders (1990), Borders et al. (1991), and Borders (in press).

Characteristics of Supervisors

Good supervisors seem to have many of the same qualities of good teachers and good counselors. They are empathic, genuine, open, and flexible. They respect their supervisees as persons and as developing professionals, and are sensitive to individual differences (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity) of supervisees. They also are comfortable with the authority and evaluative functions inherent in the supervisor role, giving clear and frequent indications of their evaluation of the counselor's performance. Even more, good supervisors really enjoy supervision, are committed to helping the counselor grow, and evidence commitment to the supervision enterprise by their preparation for and involvement in supervision sessions. These supervisors evidence high levels of conceptual functioning, have a clear sense of their own strengths and limitations as a supervisor, and can identify how their personal traits and interpersonal style may affect the conduct of supervision. Finally, good supervisors have a sense of humor which helps both the supervisor and supervisee get through rough spots in their work together and achieve a healthy perspective on their work. Such personal traits and relationship factors are considered as significant as technical prowess in supervision.

In terms of professional characteristics (roles and skills), good supervisors are knowledgeable and competent counselors and supervisors. They have extensive training and wide experience in counseling, which have helped them achieve a broad perspective of the field. They can effectively employ a variety of supervision interventions, and deliberately choose from these interventions based on their assessment of a supervisee's learning needs, learning style, and personal characteristics. They seek ongoing growth in counseling and supervision through continuing education activities, self-evaluation, and feedback from supervisees, clients, other supervisors, and colleagues.

Good supervisors also have the professional skills of good teachers (e.g., applying learning theory, developing sequential short-term goals, evaluating interventions and supervisee learning) and good consultants (e.g., objectively assessing problem situation, providing alternative interventions and/or conceptualizations of problem or client, facilitating supervisee brainstorming of alternatives, collaboratively developing strategies for supervisee and client growth). In fact, good supervisors are able to function effectively in the roles of teacher, counselor, and consultant, making informed choices about which role to employ at any given time with a particular supervisee.

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Development of the Supervisor

Existing models of supervisor development (Alonso, 1983; Hess, 1986; Stoltenberg & Delworth, 1987) give brief descriptions of supervisor stages of growth, and are quite different in their theoretical perspectives. Two assume that supervisors receive no training for their role, but change with experience and age. Only a few researchers have investigated novice supervisors; even fewer have conducted comparison studies of novice and experienced supervisors. These writings provide a fairly consistent profile of novices, but little information is available about how novices learn about supervision and develop a supervisor identity, how they think and behave at various stages of development, and what factors encourage (and discourage) their development.

In general, novices are characterized as self-doubtful, leery of being evaluative or confrontive, tending to be highly supportive and/or didactic, concrete, structured, and task-oriented. There is little flexibility in approach, with novices relying on their more familiar counseling skills and focusing more on the client and client and counseling dynamics than on counselor development. Novice supervisors also seem to have personalized supervision styles that remain stable across supervisees.

Perhaps surprisingly, comparison studies have yielded few differences between novices and experienced supervisors. In general, more experienced supervisors seem to use more teaching and sharing behaviors, and they and their supervisees are more active. Ratings of effectiveness, however, find novices to be equally effective as experienced supervisors.

There are several plausible explanations for these results. First, novices typically supervise beginning counselors, which may be the pairing that allows novices to be and/or to be seen as most effective by their supervisees. Second, "experienced" supervisors in these studies often are relatively inexperienced and, most importantly, typically have received no training in supervision. In other words, comparisons of inexperienced and experienced are not representative of comparisons of novice and expert. In fact, the expert supervisor has yet to be described empirically, particularly in terms of their actual behaviors and conceptual skills.

Conclusion

One joy and challenge of being a supervisor is the necessity of using skills from a variety of professional roles and knowing when to use each one. I must draw on my teaching, counseling, and consultation background, but integrate them in a unique way. During one supervision hour I may be highly structured; at the next, I may deliberately avoid giving suggestions. With each I am operating on today's goals within a larger context of long-term development.

A second challenge is the necessity of attending to several different levels at the same time. I am responsible for what happens to the client and to the counselor. I must be aware of counselor-client dynamics, supervisor-supervisee dynamics, and any similarities between them. I must think about what the client needs, then determine how I can help the counselor provide that for the client. I must consider the impact of the client on the counselor, client on supervisor, counselor on client, and counselor on supervisor, in addition to the supervisor's impact on counselor and client. I must assess the counselor's readiness for my intervention, taking into account a myriad of factors (e.g., developmental level, skill level, anxiety and typical ways of handling anxiety, motivation, learning style, response to authority figures, etc.). I must be cognizant of maintaining an optimum balance of challenge and support during the supervision session and across time. I have to be aware of all of these dynamics and then, almost instantaneously, create an elegant response.

As a novice supervisor, these were the exhilarating aspects of my new professional role, and they are the aspects that my students repeatedly cite as the great fun in doing supervision. When I think back to time spent with my own good supervisors, this is, gratefully, what I received. Today, as an experienced supervisor, these are the standards I set for myself - and sometimes achieve. And, as a supervisor educator, these are the measures I offer supervisor trainees so that they, too, can become "good supervisors."

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L. DiAnne Borders, Ph.D., is an associate professor of counselor education at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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